THE MESSENGER

KATHARINE HOLLAND BROWN

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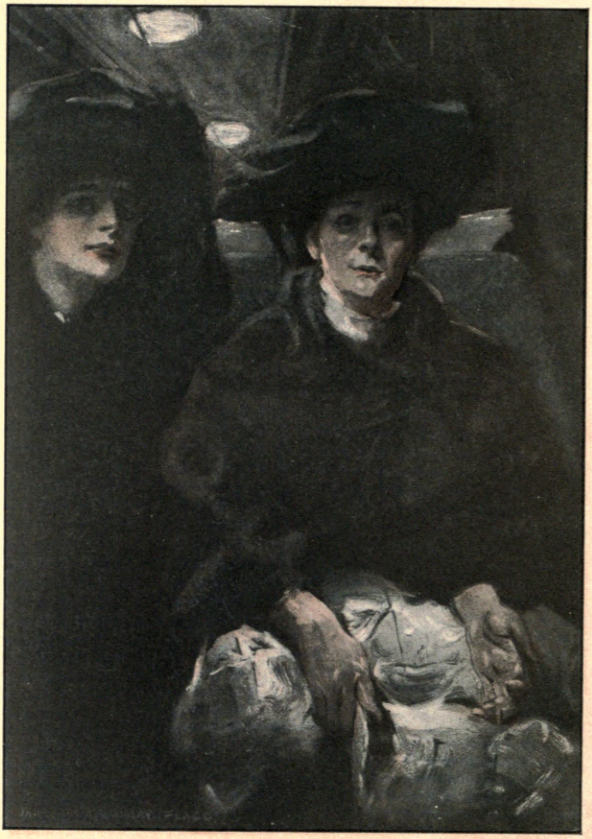

THE MESSENGER

By

Katharine Holland Brown

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THE MESSENGER

"FORTY-SECOND STREET! Grand Central Station!"

Edith MacDonald, startled from her heavy thoughts, sprang to her feet, and stood bewildered, then hurried from the subway train, in the wake of the pushing crowd. Her long crape-bound cloak tripped and hampered her; the crape veil smothered on her mouth and eddied dizzily before her eyes. The guard put out a brusque, kindly hand and steadied her to the platform. Edith did not notice him. She stood stupidly under the blazing lights, her small cold hands fumbling with her cloak. Then, suddenly remembering, she

turned and fled awkwardly up the long iron stairs. She ran with clumsy, uneven steps, like a blind woman. Her slender body wavered: every movement was graceless and unpoised. She was a straight, exquisite young thing, lissom as a dryad; but since she had put on this shrouding black, it was as if she had put on weakness and awkwardness with its dragging folds.

She reached the top stair, breathless and trembling. She sped on in her frantic haste, bought her ticket, then dashed for the north-bound train. "*Hurry, hurry, hurry!*" She heard her numbed lips muttering it over and over, a dreary, senseless chant. "*Hurry, hurry, hurry!*" As if it could matter now whether she lagged or hastened, whether she crept or ran!

She had always hurried so, for Tom. All that one golden year, they had gone racing, hand in hand, two rapturous children. But she need not hurry to reach Tom, now. Tom would not go without her. Tom—would wait!

The car was crowded and hot; yet Edith drew her wrappings close around her, for she shivered with mortal cold. She stared through the broad window. Gray, ice-locked river; gray, leafless woods; an ash-gray sky. It was always like this. For there was no color left in the world, nowadays. No rose in the east, no gold in the west; no light at all upon the weary land. . . .

One or two people were glancing at her, curiously. A sick fear assailed her. She shrank back, cowering into

her deep sheathing furs. By this time, her household would have missed her, surely. And they would be distressed and anxious. They were so devoted, so tender, so maddening—her poor family! Through all these months, they had never once left her alone, not even for an hour. She had never been outside her house, save in her own brougham, with either her mother or the steadfast family nurse at her side. How desperately they had all toiled to soothe her, to divert her! She chuckled helplessly at the thought of their adoring, witless efforts to console. The pitiful comicality of it! That they should dare to try to comfort her! That they could dream they could divert her mind from thinking of him, of Tom!

She wrenched herself erect. The laughter in her eyes yielded to a dull, miserable stare. The old pitiless Question, the unrelenting challenge which from the first hour had hounded her and tortured her, spoke now in her deepest thought. Her mouth repeated it; her very heart beat it out, in quivering, anguished pulses.

"No. This isn't the end. It can't be. Somewhere, he is alive. He's waiting for me. I must believe that. I must, I must! But—if only he had believed, too! If he had once told me that he had faith in the farther Life—that he *was sure!* If he had only given me that trust, to cling to . . . If he'd just said one word. . . . I can't hold up any longer, unless I know. I'll drown."

The train jarred to a stop. She

crept to the ground, then stood looking blankly at the little station, set deep in its frame of winter woods. One or two carriages stood near the platform. She turned from them and started away, up the icy road. She knew the way well.

And as she stumbled on, over the frozen ground, her lips moved still, whispering, over and over, her piteous litany.

"If only he had told me! If only we'd talked it over, just once! I could hold fast, I know I could—if just I knew that he had believed!"

They had been married barely twelve months, Tom and she. In their tumultuous happiness, they had never given thought to any other life, save to this overflowing, enchanting rapture of to-day. They knew no

misgivings, they felt no doubts. To them, there was no terror of cloudless noon. All their royal fortunes, their splendid joys, were theirs by divine right, the inexhaustible heritage of their kingdom of youth. And now that Tom was gone, struck away from her in one breath by horrible accident, Edith stood like one alone on a deserted world.

She faced her sorrow with a noble patience. She came of a brave race. But that implacable Question of bereavement rang through her brain by night, burnt on her searching eyes by day. If he had only once spoken! If he had only once assured her of his hope, his faith, then she could hold fast, even through this black tempest. Her own faith, a prettily childish, outgrown tinsel creed, gave

her no help. Piteously she realized that, of herself alone, she could not believe. She could cling to that hope only with Tom's grasp to help her hold.

An hour later, she stumbled back, down the lonely road to the station. Her beautiful face was colorless and impassive, drained of all expression. But her eyes baffled. They held rage, as well as agony. It had all been as she had known, inexorably, that it would be. The sight of that long mound, wrapped in frost-burnt grass, had only mocked at her. Its taunting silence infuriated. It gave not one word, not one clue. Insolently it drove her back, beaten and cowed, to her own sick round of thought. Smarting, furious, unutterably be-

reft, she blundered back, aboard the train.

Again the car was crowded. She shared a seat with another woman, a tired, shabby creature, loaded with bundles. Edith did not look her way. Side by side, the two made one of the unending contrasts of every day; Edith, swathed in her sumptuous furs and crape, her vivid young beauty hardly dimmed by its shadow; the other, a gaunt Irishwoman of middle years, dressed in forlorn, skimpy black, her thin face worn and marred by work and child-bearing. She was a commonplace figure enough. But her lips were kind. And once or twice she glanced at Edith, and a vague light lifted in her faded eyes.

Halfway into town, the train was

stopped by a trifling breakdown. There would be an hour's delay, the conductor explained, impatiently. The two women hardly noticed. They sat, indifferent, in the midst of the fretting crowd. It grew twilight; Edith shivered in the gathering chill. Her cloak had dropped from her shoulders, but she made no move to draw it back.

Presently the elder woman turned to her. She hesitated; then she drew the cloak up round the slender shoulders, and fastened it with gentle, awkward hands. Edith looked up. Their eyes met, with a slow understanding gaze.

"I know," said the elder woman, under her breath. Her knotted hand lay tenderly on Edith's black sleeve. "You lamb! I know. It's meself

that's lost all, all. First, 'twas me old mother, the sweetest soul alive. An' then me children, me own wee ones. An' then"—she halted, with a hard breath—"an' then—Himself. An' 'twas then I thought all the world was gone from me. For, oh, he'd been the good man to me!" Her wan mouth quivered. "But now, I've learned. An' I can't grieve him, like I did those first days. For"—her gaunt face took on a strange radiance, mysterious, ineffable—"*for he's the good man to me, yet.* Now, even though we two are apart. Now, and always. Though I'd niver have knowed it, mayhap, if 'twasn't the doctor had told me."

Edith heard her, in listless silence.

"The doctor it was, who brought me the word from him," she went on,

softly, after a while. "May blessings be on him an' on his, forever, for the blessing that he gave! An' yet 'tis little need he has of prayers from the likes o' me. For now he's gone Beyant, too, they tell me. Though I can't believe it, at all. For he was that alive, every inch of him! Ah, the tall, fine, merry lad he was, with his straight back, an' his grand red head, and the laugh in the black kind eyes of him! He was grand folks, too, for his people was all rich, an' fine, and he'd married him a rich girl, too, an' a beauty, they say. But none of those things made no differ in him. He was always the same. Just as friendly an' easy as if he'd been one of ourselves. An' sure, he was one of us. For we wint to him with iverything. Priest, an'

father, an' doctor, he was, all to once. An' now he's gone. . . . Wid his black laughin' eyes, an' his square chin, an' the good red head of him!"

"What doctor are you talking about? What was his name?"

Edith MacDonald roused and turned on her suddenly. Her hands clenched, cold. She stared at the other woman through a flickering mist.

"Why, young Doctor MacDonald, sure. Doctor Thomas MacDonald. An' he lived on Gramercy Park, in that big splendid stone house, with the marble porches, an' wistary vines all over it——"

Edith's lips set in an ashen line.

"I knew him, too," she said, at length. Her voice rang in her ears, faint and far away.

"Well, did ye, now!" The woman looked back at her, with kind, uncomprehending eyes. "Ah, an' wasn't he the dear lad, then! Sure, do ye remember that red head of his, ma'am, 'carrot-top,' he'd call it? An' the lean, long jaw, an' the man's sober, kind eyes of him, wid the boy's laugh a-shinin' through?"

Did she remember?

"An' the strong hand he had, an' the wise brain to rule it. How'd we come to know him? Why, 'twas from long years back; from the times when he was a-hangin' to the tail-board of the ambylance, a young snip, just servin' his time at Bellevue. He was on our beat, down through Greenwich Village, 'tis. That summer, they was workin' on the tunnel; maybe twenty times a day, the amby-

lance would go dingin' through, to fetch some poor felly who'd been knocked out wid the heat. Well, one day my wee Katy was crossin' the street, an' down come the wagon, ding-dong. Whether the horse struck her, or whether she just tumbled down careless, I never rightly knowed. But down she went, straight under the horse's feet. I wasn't twenty foot off; I give one spring, an' snatched her up in me arms before she'd more nor hit the pavement, she screechin' fire an' murder, an' every other kid on the block yellin' fit to kill. Not one scratch there was on her darlin' bones, thanks be. But Doctor MacDonald, he lep' off the tail-board, an' come tearin' back, whiter than his white coat.

"'Easy, sir,' I says. For he breathed like he'd run a mile, an' the very soul was scared out of his eyes. ''Tis not hurted she is, no more nor the scare. Whist, Katy, don't be so wild.'

"'Thank the Lord!' says he, moppin' his forehead. An' the grin began to come back in his eyes. 'I've see two miracles this day: an Irish mother with the rare blessing of common-sense; and an injy-rubber child. Come along, Smith.' An' he hops on the step, an' he's off, with a wave of that red head.

"It's maybe fifty times he's passed us by that summer, on a hurry call. But he's never forgot to wave to us, as gay as you please.

"Ah! That was the black year for us, intirely. First, me brother

Larry was brought home, near killed in that box factory fire. By God's mercy, 'twas Doctor MacDonald that we thought to send for. An' he came, flyin'. An' he worked over Larry, hour after hour, an' he brought the boy through alive. No other man livin' could ha' done it. 'Twas like he carrid him back in his arms, from the very gates of death.

"An' the same it was, a month after, when the dipathery came. He couldn't save me little Paitrick, nor me poor sister's baby, Eileen. But he saved my Katy for us, that we had the one child left, to feed our starved hearts on. 'Twas niver his medicines that done the work. 'Twas the power of the man, himself. He'd come any time we wanted him, night or day. He'd do for my little Katy

like she was a prince's child. I mind one night we sent for him, at midnight it was. 'Twas not a month after he was marrid. He'd gone to a great ball, an' he came splittin' down in his motor, all in his fine evenin' clothes, for there was no time to lose. Katy, she'd been like she was sinkin'. But she waked up for his voice. An' she smiled, an' put up her little hot hands, to stroke his grand shiny shirt-front. 'Pretty, pretty,' she says in her little choked voice. He turned an' grinned up at me, he nodded that red head. The laugh was dancin' in the black eyes of him, but his jaw set like a rock. 'Sure, if she's that set on pretty clothes, she'll come round, all right,' says he. An' come round she did. But not even he could save our little Paitrick. An'

the next year, when Himself was took away——"

Her low voice faltered to silence. Edith glanced up again. Through the dark car window, she caught the reflection of their faces, side by side. Curiously she realized that they two, she and this worn, middle-aged woman, looked alike. They might have been an elder and a younger sister. Sisters in sorrow, they were. The same anguish had scarred both the lovely young face and the weary older one. Both stared out upon their world with the hungry asking eyes of bereavement, searching eternally, uncomforted.

"Ah, then, not even Doctor MacDonald could help. He was like he's tied, hand and foot. An' it cut him to the heart. He stayed by me

an' fought the night through, he an' the big surgeon he'd brought, an' the nurses. But 'twas no use at all. . . .

"Afterwards . . . I don't well remember. I went fumblin' around at me work, clumsy-like; I couldn't half sense things. I was like one struck blind an' dumb. An' I couldn't breathe right. 'Twas like somethin' smothered me. 'Twasn't that I grieved Himself so. No, for I hadn't the sense to know what had hit me, I just knowed the life was gone out of me, that was all. An' all those months, I kept clutchin' out in the dark, for to find Himself. I *had* to get hold of him, somehow. I kept his hat hangin' on its peg, an' his pipe laid on the mantel, where me eyes could see them, every minute, as I wint round at me work. I'd go

to bed nights wid his old coat, wid the good pipe smell in it, rolled under my head, hopin' maybe I could dream. . . . But not one thought nor easing would come of it, all. Never one glimpse of Himself. Never one touch of his big kind hand, to comfort me. An' after a while, I knew I couldn't stand it no longer. I'd struggled me best. Now the time had come, I must have help. Or else sink.

"'Twas strange, too. For the year gone, I'd buried me old mother, an' it seemed then like a piece of me was buried with her. An' then I'd lost me boy, me baby; an' that was crueller still. But when I lost Himself, my own man, who'd always been that good to me, who'd been that big an' kind an' strong that I

could always hold fast to him, no matter what came to me—then seemed like I'd just let go. 'Tis the same always, I suppose. Mary, pity us! We women are all like that."

Edith nodded, vaguely. Again she looked deep into the other's face, and found, as in a tragic mirror, her own face shadowed there.

"Along March, there come a gray cold day, when I couldn't bear it no longer. I'd been to the priest, yes. But even Father Kelley himself couldn't help me. For, sure, hadn't he knowed Himself? Didn't he know well, just what I'd lost? An' for all he longed to comfort me, the best he could do was, to set there wid his hands twisted, hard, an' tell me the rewards of Heaven.

What did I want wid the rewards of Heaven? I wanted Himself. I wanted the grip of his great rough hand, an' the noise of his laugh, an' the stomp of his foot when he'd come up the stairs. Somewhere, Himself was alive. I was hangin' to that, like a drownin' thing. But —oh, my God! The hour'd come when *I had to know!*

"Maybe you'll think strange of me, ma'am. But I was that wild, I'd have clutched at anything. As I came blundherin' down the street, I passed Madame Clytemnestra's, the medium's. An' for all I knew 'twas foolishness, an' worse, I couldn't hold me feet from carryin' me in.

"I tried to tell Madame Clytemnestra. But the words, they stuck in me throat. An' she sat there, in

her red-an'-gilt clothes, lookin' at me; an' for all they say she's such a divil of a talker, she hadn't no word to say. But she gave me a little purple bag, an' said maybe it would help. 'Maybe,' says she, thinkin'-like. An' she went wid me down the steps, for they was sleeted, an' she wouldn't take no money.

"I crawled home, somehow. I remember how the figures on the oil-cloth danced an' swam as I climbed the stairs. 'Twas like I was climbin' them for the last time.

"I sat there by the windy, wid the purple bag in one hand, an' Father Kelley's thracks in the other, a long time. After a while, the Bellevue wagon wint lippin' by. I glimpsed Doctor MacDonald's red head through the door, an' saw him wave

his hand to me wee Katy, who was playin' on the curb. An' I had a queer thought of envy for the sick one, whoever it might be, that he'd be carin' for.

"After long hours, I heard wee Katy runnin' upstairs, an' a heavy step followin' after. An' one minute I looked at that purple bag: an' the wall went red and dark before me eyes. Then me heart sank again. For the door opened, an' in walked Doctor MacDonald.

"For a while, he didn't say nothin'. He sat wid wee Katy on his knee, an' fed her pop-corn. An' I could feel him lookin' round the room, at Himself's old hat an' coat on the peg, an' his pipe on the shelf, pitiful-like. An' after a while, he looked down at the purple bag in me hands; an' the

pity in his eyes was like he'd spoke it, out loud. Then he began to talk.

"'He was a pretty good sort, Mrs. McCarthy,' he says. 'I've knocked around a good bit, an' I'm something of a judge. You had a man to be proud of. You don't know how many good turns he's done for folks, one time an' another. Sometimes I wonder if anybody thinks to tell you of them.'

"'Tell me any you know,' says I. For I was hungry for the sound of Himself's name. So he went on, very slow, wid his eyes on the floor, an' his hand pattin' wee Katy's head.

"'First time I ever saw McCarthy was when the 'longshoremen's strike was on. He was teamin' for the

Colony Fruit people, an' what with their stuff bein' perishable, and the strikers hectoring him, and the thermometer climbing around ninety-six, down on those broilin' wharves, why McCarthy's job wasn't a cinch. But no matter what turned up, McCarthy stayed peaceable as a spring lamb. You couldn't rattle him, to save you. You couldn't make him mad, either. Only once, in all those weeks, did anybody see him fire up. But that time—Jove, but that was the lovely sight!

"'Early one Monday morning, Shayne, the Colony people's strike-breaker, had brought down an Italian gang, and set them to work unloading a fruit schooner, right under the pickets' eyes. It was a fool's trick, for the pickets were all Kerry men,

and spoiling for a fight; and the Italians weren't on the ground ten minutes before the fun began. It was a peppery young Neapolitan, Pietro somebody, who opened the ball. The pickets kept daring the crowd, and slinging names, but the gang paid no attention, till this Pietro caught one name he wouldn't stand for. He picked up a good ripe melon, and fired it into the crowd. It was a good shot; maybe half a dozen strikers got a juicy swat. Ridiculous as it was, that was all the crowd wanted. They lit in on the Italians like a falling house. Pietro got his share, and more. Between the heat, and its being Monday morning, the boys had a beautiful grouch on, and they didn't realize they were going so far. By the time

McCarthy spied the fracas, and came galloping his team down the pier, the life was pretty much slammed out of that poor little loon, Pietro. He grabbed Pietro out of the shindy, dumped him behind a pile of freight and then sailed in. It must have gone against the grain, to side with the dagoes against his own mates, but he did it, all right. He held Flannigan, the leader, up by the collar, while he expressed his sentiments, and in two minutes that blarney tongue of his, half petting, half whiplash, had the men all calmed down, and shamefaced and grinning like a pack of licked schoolboys. Somebody had sent in a hurry call, but by the time we got there, it was all over but the shouting. McCarthy had 'em eating out of his

hand. He'd saved the company's consignment, he'd saved the boys a mess in court and a black eye for the union, he'd saved Pietro's life—for the kid pulled through all right, though he was badly thrashed. And for McCarthy, it was all in the day's work. When the inspector and I started in to praise him, he thought we were guying him. That was McCarthy, straight through. He was a good sort, he was.'

"'He never told me one livin' word of all that, at all,' says I. ''Twas Himself all over, to side wid the under dog.'

"'That was always his way,' says the doctor, wid a nod. 'You knew what he did for Garrity, the time his ribs was broke when the derrick fell?'

"'For Garrity?' says I. 'Sure,

Himself never turned his hand for Garrity, nor any of his kin. For Himself could never abide him. Townies they were, in the old country, but they were the black haters here. Himself paid his share in the Brotherhood for Garrity's bills at the hospital, but that's all ever he did for a Garrity, mind.'

"'Was it now?' says the doctor, an' the grin lightin' his eyes again. 'So I thought myself. So I'd think to-day, if I hadn't caught McCarthy red-handed. He come slinkin' to me with seventeen dollars and sixty cents, and asked me, would I send it in a money order to Garrity's old father, back in Ballyoran. Mumbled something about its being a little hand-out from the boys, only they didn't want their names put in.

I was just low-minded enough to suspect him that minute. And at eleven o'clock that very night, I chased down to Pier 19 on an emergency call; and, driving back, we passed McCarthy with his team, loaded to the gunwale. I didn't say one word; but the next day I traced it up. Bless you, here was McCarthy, doing four hours extra teaming by night, and puttin' the money to Garrity's account at the Dime Savings, so it would be lying there ready to give Garrity a leg up when he came out of the hospital. He had his tracks well covered; Garrity never learned, I'll wager. But I charged him with it, straight out, and whaled him for not letting me help. First, he tried to lie out of it. Then he looked like he'd been steal-

ing sheep. And he swore me not to tell the boys. "They'd have the laugh on me for twinty years to come," says he. "For Garrity an' me has been inimies, tried an' true. An' Garrity, if he gits wind of it, he'll niver forgive me. But sure 'tis bad enough that the poor pig-headed gossoon should lay there an' suffer, widout that he an' the kids must face the winter empty-handed. An' mind ye hold yer tongue!" he blusters after me, fierce an' hangdog at once. And he slammed away, lashing his team like he's a riot call. That was McCarthy, all right. The best lad ever, he was.'

"I'd listened, greedy-like, to every word.

"'I'd never heard one breath of them doings, neither,' says I. An'

somehow, for the first time in all those weeks, I felt the weight ease on me breast. 'Himself was that close-mouthed! But, sure, 'tis good to know of it, now.'

"'Yes,' said the doctor, thinkin'-like. 'Yes. It is good to know these things. And—and maybe, he himself wants you to know them, now. So—perhaps that is why I'm telling you of them.'

"He turned and looked at me, straight. An' it was like a light came into the room.

"'You mean,'—I says, 'you mean that you believe—do They know? Can we ever find Them, again?'

"He leaned over, pitiful-like, an' took the foolish purple bag from my hands.

"'Yes,' he says, very low. 'We'll

find Them, again. Be sure of that. But—not these ways. I'm mighty clumsy about putting it into words for you. But—but I don't just believe. I *know*. Why, it's certain as daylight. What else are all these things I'm telling you, about McCarthy, but messages from him, to make ye sure? And why else should ye keep on lovin' him? Unless it is that the love between ye two is a bond, so strong that not even Death can break it?

"'No, I don't know how to put it into words for you. I only wish I could. But to me it's like this. All these good memories that you have of him, go to make this bond, that unites you two, still. Every kind, decent thing he's done is a link in that chain. An' every bit of news

of him, like this I've told you to-day, is like a word across the night, from him to you. He is not lost to you. He is not dead. I don't just believe what I say. I *know*.'

"And he was right. For, in these months, I've watched, and thought, and learned to understand. As my need comes, I'll remember them, all. The little kind, good things he did for folks; the gentleness of him; the friendly ways—when I mind them 'tis like the grip of his big warm hand in the dark. An' it's that that keeps the life in me, ma'am." Her sombre eyes lighted with sudden fire. Across her faded, work-marred face there flowed again that white, mysterious radiance, the radiance of a love triumphant, immortal. "Now I have those things to hold fast to, I

can be sure. He's not dead, my man. The hour 'ill come when I'll find him, once again. 'Tis sure as the light of day. An' till then, I can hold fast to these things, that keep him alive to me. He sent me that promise, straight through the doctor's word. An' 'tis the truth, forever, just as the doctor said. 'Tis a small cord, an' a frail one, maybe. But it will hold. For 'tis the eternal tie between us an' our beloved dead."

The train drew slowly to a standstill. Edith stood up: for a moment, her hand grasped the other woman's hard fingers: then she turned, and went swiftly from the train.

She walked through the long,

dusky station, erect, transfigured. The folding black yet clouded round her white calm face. But her mouth curved once more in its old lovely happiness, and her eyes were sweet with peace. Across that far, unfathomed Night, her pleading voice had carried. And, in the words of this, their humble messenger, the answer had come back to her, a cry all ringing golden with assurance. A promise, and a covenant; a certainty with wings.

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